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ABSTRACT

A study identified the characteristics and practices of reading teachers that produce both skillful and interested readers. Subjects, 216 elementary, 101 secondary, and 74 special education majors enrolled in either an elementary or secondary reading methods course at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, were administered a 3-item survey identical to that used in two earlier studies. Results indicated that: (1) commendable teacher practices include providing free reading time, motivation by offering rewards, reading aloud to students, and demonstrated enthusiasm for reading; (2) practices detracting from reading enjoyment included round robin reading, few reading choices, irrelevant reading assignments, and required book reports; and (3) besides teachers, parents were identified overwhelmingly as contributing to reading enjoyment. Results also indicate differences between elementary and secondary education students' responses. Findings suggest the importance of the teacher in the development of feelings of competence and interest in reading in students. (RS)

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DEVELOPING A LOVE OF READING:
WHAT HELPS, WHAT HURTS

Roberta L. Berglund
District #44, Lombard, Illinois

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University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

July 1991

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ABSTRACT

There is continued interest in determining factors that influence students' attitudes toward reading. This study examines the recollections of education majors at a midwestern university regarding influences on the development of their reading attitudes. Findings confirm the conclusions of earlier studies and re-emphasize the importance of the role teachers play in developing students' attitudes toward reading.

For many years, reading professionals have been seeking information which might help to identify the characteristics and practices of teachers of reading that produce both skillful and interested readers (Artley, 1975; Bruckerhoff, 1977; Heathington & Alexander, 1984; Johns & Galen, 1977). Artley began to establish such data when he invited 100 junior and senior education majors in a basic reading methods course to respond to three questions: 1) From what you can recall, what did your teachers (on any level) do that you feel promoted your competence and interest in reading? 2) In the same manner, was there anything that your teachers did that detracted from your interest in reading? 3) Was there someone or something besides your teacher who contributed to your competence and interest in reading? His data and that of a follow-up study by Bruckerhoff (1977) were reported more than a decade ago. Since then, several researchers have addressed the role of interest, attitude, and motivation in the development of effective readers (Johns & Galen, 1977; Rupley & Logan, 1985; Smith & Feathers, 1983). All have extended our knowledge about the teacher's role in the development of attitudes toward reading. After examining work spanning more than a decade, we concluded that a study, similar to Artley's, that examined the perspectives of today's students of education would add to the knowledge base of the affective domain.

Using the instrument developed by Artley, we administered the survey to 391 preservice teachers (216 elementary, 101 secondary, and 74 special education majors) enrolled in either an elementary or secondary reading methods course at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. The

survey was completed early in each semester over a three-year period. Ample class time was provided for students to respond.

As the data were analyzed, categories of responses emerged. We believe our findings document reading situations that lead to emotional responses toward the reading process. The results may contribute to the decisions teachers make or actions teachers take as they establish reading programs in their own classrooms.

Question 1: From what you can recall, what did your teachers (on any level) do that you feel promoted your competence and interest in reading?

Categories representing commendable teacher practices are listed in order of their frequency.

- The teacher provided free reading time.
- The teacher motivated students by offering rewards.
- The teacher talked with students and guided their reading.
- The teacher read aloud to students.
- The teacher demonstrated enthusiasm.

In addition, students of elementary and special education frequently cited library activities; however, students of secondary education rarely included this area.

From student comments, we begin to create an image of teacher practices that promoted students' competence and interest in reading. These findings are similar to those of Artley (1975) and Bruckerhoff (1977) in that the time spent reading aloud to students and talking about books with students goes far in stimulating feelings of interest and competence in reading. Similarly, providing free reading time was remembered positively by students in both decades. It is interesting to note that, like Artley's population, our elementary and special education students preferred variety in their day and often mentioned activities such as participating in book sharing experiences, book clubs, and

reading goals involving the attainment of goals for which rewards were given as motivating and interesting. Secondary students, however, less frequently remembered this aspect of their education. These students found teacher discussion and guidance particularly important to their development as readers.

Artley reports that students often remembered book clubs as stimulating. A larger portion of our special education majors remembered this aspect as favorable (16%) as compared with 4% of the elementary education majors and only 1% of the secondary education majors. Although not among the most frequently-cited practices, book clubs were always remembered as a positive influence. Conversely, some of the practices cited, such as rewards and book reports, were recalled as some of the most negative experiences teachers devised.

Question 2: In the same manner, was there anything that your teachers did that detracted from your interest in reading?

A wide variety of responses were also given for Question 2. The five most common categories of responses, in order of frequency, included the following:

- Teachers used oral (round robin) reading.
- Teachers provided few reading choices.
- Teachers gave irrelevant reading assignments.
- Teachers inadequately accommodated diverse reading abilities.
- Teachers required book reports.

Student responses to Question 2 seem to suggest a failure to "connect" with the student. Activities that seemed purposeless and that students did not find appropriate detracted from reading. Often, the activities seemed tied to an inability or reluctance to treat students as individuals. Instead, all students were given the same activities, activities that often fit none of them. Artley (1975)

recommended that teachers curtail required book reports and round-robin oral reading. Yet, more than a decade later, our students still recall both with bitterness. Why do teachers persist in using practices that are almost certain to lead to the development of poor attitudes and feelings of inadequacy toward reading?

The manner in which teachers accommodated ability differences were frequently cited by elementary and special education majors as detriments to the development of positive feelings toward reading. Secondary education majors less frequently recalled this as a negative aspect of their school careers. Similarly, round-robin oral reading was also recalled less frequently by this group of students. This finding may suggest that these students do not foresee themselves using student oral reading to a great extent in their own teaching or they may not have experienced it in their own secondary school careers. In contrast, secondary students appeared to be particularly frustrated by irrelevant reading assignments. Nearly 23% of this group shared their feelings of frustration concerning this aspect of their schooling. From their comments we glean a picture of schools as places where reading was not an integral, important part of meaningful learning experiences. The textbooks were assigned to be read because they were there, not because they contributed in important ways to information or interest in the content areas.

Question 3: Was there someone or something besides your teacher who contributed to your competence and interest in reading?

Although responses varied, the category of parents was mentioned much more often than any other. The five most common categories of responses are listed below in order of frequency

- Parents
- Relatives
- Library programs
- Self-interest
- Friends

Parents, particularly the mother, were overwhelmingly cited (by nearly 70% of the respondents) as significant in the development of positive attitudes and competence in reading. Like the studies of Artley (1975) and Bruckerhoff (1977), our study showed that reading to children, having reading materials in the home, and demonstrating interest in the child's progress were important ways that parents and relatives contributed to attitude development. The library was another important influence.

What Today's Teachers Need to Know About Developing Positive Attitudes Toward Reading

Our findings invite reflection concerning the role of the teacher in developing students' positive attitudes toward reading. This study demonstrates that teachers have a powerful influence on students' feelings of competence and interest in reading. Generally, students like reading better if they have some choice in what they read, if they are rewarded for their reading, and if significant others show that they like reading and that they care about the students' reading experiences. Students dislike reading if they have little voice in what they read, if they risk failure or embarrassment, and if activities are inappropriate for their own needs and interests.

We draw three important implications from this study. First, prospective and practicing teachers should be reminded of the potential long-term effects of their teaching practices. Teachers' words and actions regarding reading appear to have profound and long-lasting consequences. One student's comments reflect the feelings of many: "The teachers that promoted my competence and interest in reading were the teachers that displayed characteristics of warmth, acceptance of how I read, questions I asked, and me as a person. They were enthusiastic about the reading material."

A strong message from this study and those of Artley (1975) and Bruckerhoff (1977) is that round-robin oral reading has a negative effect on feelings of competence. Likewise, allowing students to make some choices about what to read and when to read seems an easy and effective way to promote positive feelings about reading.

Second, in planning curriculum, additional emphasis should be placed on planning experiences that foster students' positive feelings about reading. As teachers, we need to realize that how students feel about reading affects their development as readers. Heathington and Alexander (1984) suggest that, in addition to helping students become competent and skillful readers, teachers need to plan specific ways to develop positive feelings in a variety of reading environments.

Comments from our students indicate that teachers should consider incorporating the following ten ideas into their classroom reading experiences:

1. Allow students some choice in selecting reading materials.
2. Make oral reading purposeful.
3. Plan book sharing times where the teacher and the students discuss what they have been reading.
4. Provide time for recreational reading.
5. Read aloud to students.
6. Demonstrate enthusiasm for reading.
7. Involve parents to ensure their continued interest and participation in their children's development as readers.
8. Encourage use of school and community library facilities.
9. Provide opportunities for students to join book clubs.
10. Develop interesting and motivating activities involving books (plays, writing class books, etc.)

Finally, teachers must realize that activities that enhance positive attitudes for some students may be negative influences for others. One such example is competition. Some prospective teachers remember reading-related competition favorably because they often won; others recall competition negatively because they never won. Rather than requiring all students to participate in the same

programs or activities, a variety of experiences from which to choose might accommodate individual differences and interests.

This study supports the importance of the teacher in the development of feelings of competence and interest in reading. It also documents how specific teacher characteristics and practices profoundly influence the development of reading attitudes. Several decades of research indicate that the content and delivery of reading curricula need to be adjusted to ensure the development of students who not only can read, but who will find reading to be an interesting and enjoyable activity.

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